

Engaging the learner: Reflections on the use of student presentations

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Abstract

Previous research has shown that university students, when asked to rank different methods of learning and assessment tend to rate student presentations unfavourably. There are though, sound reasons for constructing learning situations around student presentations, resulting in presentations being an integral part of our psychology degree over the last ten years. However, the course has experienced a considerable rise in the number of students during the same period, making it much harder to create meaningful opportunities for student presentations. In spite of this growth, the team considered ways in which presentations can remain within the course and systematically evaluated their effectiveness. Whilst data show that students may find the experience stressful and that they have some concerns about the quality of their learning, these concerns, we believe are more than outweighed by the advantages, which are discussed at length. Students' retrospective reflections on courses that have been designed around student presentations give a much more favourable view of this learning method than that given through hypothetical ratings.

Introduction

We believe that an important part of our professional practice is to reflect on our teaching and, in the best traditions of quality assurance inspections, ask ourselves whether there is evidence of learning taking place in our students. To answer this question, the teaching methods used and the approach to study adopted by the students have to be considered. Teaching methods may be considered as lying on a continuum from being high in student participation and control to high in teacher participation and control, where the traditional, formal

lecture lies (Brown, 1993). High teacher participation and control may result in a high degree of passivity in students in lectures. An academically bright, interested and committed student who wants to do well is likely to get more out of a formal lecture than a student who is less committed, who just wants to collect a degree, and who is not interested in attaining an in depth understanding of the subject matter being studied. The latter group of students with poorer achievement motivation is in higher proportion in today's classes (Biggs, 1999). If these

students' learning environment is predominantly the formal lecture, then it is to be expected that these students will often seem to be engaged in a range of behaviours that are unlikely to be associated with learning. The students themselves may, incorrectly, feel that they are learning because they are writing down all of every slide that is displayed or because they are enjoying a good theatrical performance by the teacher. Alternatively, they may reflect their low engagement by dreaming (sleeping even), playing with their mobile phone or other activities, which are likely to be incompatible with learning.

In a situation where the majority of the teaching is through formal lectures, then there is likely to be less learning taking place than might in a different teaching and learning environment, which was designed to engage students to a greater extent. Sadly there is some evidence (Butler, 1992) that the formal lecture is still over represented in higher education.

Can the teaching and learning environment be designed to promote greater student participation, engagement and, maybe, deep learning in the students? (see, for example, Biggs, 1999; Entwistle, 1988; Hartley, 1998).

Whilst the traditional lecture may be enhanced to engage students more, making it more effective, (see Biggs, 1999) alternative teaching methods such as small group teaching, laboratory work where possible, or research projects may well stimulate students, promoting better involvement with the academic material (Brown, 1993), and hence better learning.

Action research that had worked well in developing effective tutorials for students on a distance learning course (Stevenson, Sander & Naylor, 1995) suggested a possible strategy for structuring teaching and learning environments that might be more effective than relying solely on the lecture. The process advocated involved asking the students, before the course started, how

they would prefer to be taught and why. This seemed to be a good strategy because students themselves are 'one of the best resources in any learning situation' (Rees & Harris, 1992), to which might be added that they are a frequently overlooked resource. In this, we were acting as teachers looking critically at our own teaching situations for the purpose of improving the quality of the students' learning environment (Hopkins, 1998; Lefrançois, 2000). Stevenson, Sander and Naylor's (1996) research used a telephone interview with a small sample of an incoming cohort, supported by a postal questionnaire to the whole cohort. The students' views about how tutorials could be made more effective were informative and, on occasions, surprising. This feedback facilitated modification of tutorial practice heeding, where possible and desirable, student preferences.

Reassured that this was a fruitful way of guiding teaching practice, the methodology was extended to examine students' expectations of teaching in traditional university settings (Sander, Stevenson, King & Coates, 2000). When students were asked to identify the way they would most like to be taught during their undergraduate course, student presentations came ninth and last in a list of teaching and learning methods. When asked to identify the methods they would least like to be taught by, student presentations came third behind formal lectures and student role-play (Table 1).

The message was clear: when asked to rate presentations as a teaching/learning method, students did not like them. The students gave two main reasons for their dislike. One was the stress and anxiety they frequently cause and the other was concern over the poor learning opportunities which may be given to peers who could be expected to learn from each presentation. There is some evidence that the relative importance of these reasons differs across different student groups (Sander & Stevenson, *in press*). The students identified interactive

Table 1. Students’ rank ordering of teaching and learning methods they would like and would not like during their undergraduate course.

Teaching and Learning Method	Rank (1 represents the <u>most</u> frequent choice)	
	Would like to be taught by	Would NOT like to be taught by
Interactive lecture	1	8
Student centred teaching	2	6
Tutorial	3	8
Teaching session based around group work	4	7
Group work	5	5
Formal lecture	6	2
Private study	7	4
Student role play	8	1
Student presentations	9	3

lectures and well designed group environments like tutorials as favoured teaching and learning methods. When assessments were considered, presentations did a little better, coming fifth in the list of nine possible assessment methods (Table 2).

The data from students’ expectations of university study suggest that students generally do not want presentations as part of their teaching and learning or assessment. However, Biggs (1999, p.110) argues that there are good reasons to believe that putting students in a situation where they become the teacher can be very effective. Three reasons are given: the student-teacher will present material from a different perspective; the student-teacher will be more aware of examples of ineffective communication from experienced teachers and avoid them and; to avoid losing face with their peers, the student-teacher will make great efforts to avoid getting things wrong. One way to set up students as teachers is through student presentations. Some examples of good practice can be found in Hounsell,

McCulloch and Scott (1996), Curtis (1999) and Dienes (personal communication, 31 August, 2001). Rees and Harris (1992), arguing for a place for student presentations in the undergraduate curriculum suggest that they offer a number of distinct advantages, all of which are likely to promote deep learning. Curtis (1999), in her survey of practice in higher education arrived at similar conclusions. The benefits of student presentations, according to these authors are:

- They provide variety in learning approaches.
- They provide stimulation for the group.
- They promote the sharing of information and enthusiasm amongst peers.
- They encourage autonomy and independent learning.
- They provide opportunities for the development of team skills and listening skills.
- They provide an increase in expertise of the individual student, not only in terms of knowledge, but also in presentation skills, confidence and self-esteem.

Table 2. Ranked preferences for the different assessment methods.

	Rank (1 represents the <u>most</u> frequent choice)
Exams	1=
Course work consisting of:	
Essays	1=
Research projects	3
Problems/exercises	4
Oral presentations	5
Laboratory work	6
Course journal	7
Poster presentaflons	8
Computing exercises	9

- They allow for the testing of knowledge and understanding in a situation where the tutor is able to assess whether the student is able to apply and extend previously gained knowledge in the form of concepts and theories to their own work.
- They increase the likelihood that students will consult original sources rather than textbooks, giving them familiarity with research methods and encouraging critical evaluation, which means that work in other areas of the course improves.
- They lead to an improvement in the quality of seminar discussion and participation.
- For courses that include student projects, presentations stimulate ideas for project topics, and suggest methods of data collection and analysis.
- They promote preparation (usually through role play) for specific professional/real life situations.
- They provide an essential preparation for employability by developing a number of transferable and life skills.

If student presentations followed a series of fully referenced-led lectures, designed to provide summaries of the main theoretical and research issues in the area, then a learning context would have been created that matched the four criteria that Biggs (1999) suggests are paramount. These are a well structured knowledge base; an appropriate motivational context; learner activity; and interaction with others.

There are known academic difficulties with student presentations, in addition to the students' concerns over stress levels and the quality of information they may be given. It is not unknown for students to complain that teachers are expected to teach. Indeed, one of Stevenson, Sander and Naylor's (1996) respondents remarked that they had been paid to be taught! In this context 'it is helpful to remember that what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher does' (Shuell, 1986). Hartley (1998) draws attention to the fact that the criteria for a good presentation can be vague, which is of particular significance if the presentations are to be assessed. Nor can

presentations easily be repeated, which means that they should be videoed to allow independent verification of any grades awarded or to resolve student appeals. Nor can they be assessed 'blind'. It is hard to see how a live presentation can be anonymised in the same way that an essay or an exam script can.

Of course presentations do not have to be assessed. Assessment and teaching/learning are two separate issues. If they are to be assessed, the weighting can be relatively small. Students are increasingly used to video cameras and a discrete and static camera can easily be forgotten. The key question is whether it is possible to address the concerns that students have with presentations, to allow the benefits from them to show. The action research that is reported here identifies developments in modules to incorporate student presentations, which may or may not be assessed and considers their effectiveness, evidenced by student evaluations.

Case Study: Psychology Degree 1991-2001.

Background

Our undergraduate psychology degree recruited its first intake in 1991. This degree was designed by a small team, two of which were psychologists. Prior to this all psychology teaching had been restricted to contributing to courses in vocational subjects allied to medicine, in particular speech therapy. The new degree was called Psychology and Communication and shared some teaching with speech therapy students. To quote from the course documentation of the time 'Students on our degree study not only the core psychology components common to all such undergraduate degrees, but also linguistics and phonetics. The aim of the course is to enable students to have a thorough understanding of communication as an interactive and dynamic process.'

Scientific analysis of communication was central to the degree, but so was the aim of encouraging the students to become effective communicators. To this end, and based on the considerable teaching experience of the existing team, all three years of study required the students to undertake presentations, both as part of the learning strategy and as assessment. This may be best illustrated by examples taken from each end of the degree.

In the first term of Level I the students studied Communication Skills, which involved an analysis of effective communication and consisted largely of group work and presentations. Class presentations were introduced gradually through the term. To begin with, the cohort worked largely in small groups presenting information informally within the group. As the term progressed, the group would choose a spokesperson to present to the class, then the group would present to the class and the final step was for individuals to prepare and give their own presentations. In this way each student acquired some experience of presenting and learned the elements of effective presentations by watching their peers.

At the other extreme, one of the higher level subjects on the degree was Language and Social Psychology. This module began with a lead lecture series, designed to identify and clarify the main theoretical and research issues in the area. After these, students were each assigned a relevant recent research paper to read, digest and present to the rest of the class as a formal presentation. Thus at this stage students were responsible to an extent for their peers' learning.

This repeated exposure to presentations seemed to be both a satisfactory method of teaching and assessment as well as improving students' presentation skills, now recognised as one of the core skills of undergraduate programme (e.g. Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2000).

Evaluation data collected at the time indicated that some students still found it an unnerving experience, but the overall response was positive. Such a programme of study will not make every individual into polished presenters, but the teaching team did feel that each student's standard improved as a result of the experience. When our first cohort ($n = 20$) graduated in 1994 it was anticipated that they would be better prepared for the interviews and presentations that they would require for the next step in their respective careers. (Indeed when one of our finalists presented the results of her final year project at a national student conference, the standard of her presentation technique caused the Chair to compliment her and produced a spontaneous round of applause from the audience).

However, nothing is static in higher education in UK these days. Our terms became semesters; our subjects became modules. Our degree increased in popularity, our graduates appeared to prosper, our Funding Council assessment declared our provision to be Excellent and, as in the rest of the sector, our intake gradually increased. By 1997 our recruitment target stood at 80 and we were offering a straight psychology route in parallel with the communication route to appeal to those who did not want to study the specialist areas of linguistics and phonetics.

Identifying the problem

The teaching team found itself in a dilemma faced by all of HE in these days of 'expanding' higher education: how to maintain academic standards in the face of increasing student numbers without commensurate increase in resources? An effect of this was to curtail the tutorial and small group activities, which facilitate student presentations, that had been prevalent within the degree, as there were just too many students and too few staff to run them. Another serious effect of expansion was the necessity to review the number of

presentations used in the degree. A group of 20 students each making a 20-minute presentation in a two-hour weekly session takes four weeks. Quadruple the student numbers, and the result does not even fit a 15 week semester. Inevitably, the number of modules involving presentations decreased over time. This meant that the overall improvement in student performance was no longer as evident as it had been in the early days. The subject matter of Communication Skills became absorbed by other level I modules in a rationalisation of provision across the year. These other modules however did not allow for small group work, but were instead lecture based. Modules at Levels 2 and 3 were amended gradually over a couple of years and presentations were omitted from both teaching strategies and assessment. Eventually, in the annual informal review of the course in the summer of 2000, it was necessary to acknowledge that only one module was still using presentations, Level 2 Developmental Psychology.

This presented a quandary, as student presentations as a teaching method had been directly endorsed by both external examiners and the students themselves. The external examiners commented on the depth of learning students demonstrated in their assessed student work for these modules. The students, in both formal evaluations and through anecdotal discussion, showed that presentations were valued as part of the learning process. Comparing the average module mark from Level 2 Developmental Psychology, which used non-assessed presentations, with the average year mark showed that students were certainly not disadvantaged by presentations as, from the introduction of the module in 1996, the mean module mark has always been greater than the overall mean year mark. Yet, the very success of the degree itself and the resultant increase in class size was militating against the use of presentations.

Thinking of ways to tackle it

The question became: What are the alternatives?

1. Reduce the duration of each presentation. A significant reduction in length will however restrict the depth of information that can be covered. This may not be a problem if the purpose of the presentation is either to build skills in the presenter or to be a means of assessment. It would be a problem if others were expected to learn from the student presenter.
2. Allow team presentations of individual topics. The topics still take 20 minutes but three or four students are presenting the material. For example, a module that could be successfully adapted was a Level 2 module, psychometrics. The task here was to present a psychometric test to the class. The presentations were to be structured with the following: background, description of the test, experience of administration, scoring, its current use in research and evaluation. When the class was 20, this task was shared between two students. With a class of 80, it could be shared between six. Although this module, too, was subsequently modified and the use of presentations abandoned. However, not all modules are amenable to this type of approach.
3. Run concurrent sessions. This has resource implications in terms of staff and rooms, but was the approach used by the one module that had retained presentations throughout the course changes. Level 2 Developmental Psychology adopted this approach with group workshops run in the main hall. Each of eight groups of 10 students would cover the same topics in a series of workshops. Each topic was delivered through a student presentation, the lecturer circulating amongst the workshop groups throughout the session. With non-assessed presentations it can work.

It would be possible, therefore, in some instances, but not all, to adopt strategies that preserved presentations as an integral part of the degree.

Doing it

The team was resolved to reintroduce presentations as a key element of the degree and two opportunities were available.

The first was a level three option, Culture, Identity and Development. It was made clear to students that a substantial part of the assessment for this would take the form of presentations. Thirteen students enrolled on this option, several stating that the nature of the assessment had been influential in their decision. Thus those who enjoy presenting, admittedly a minority, had the chance of selecting this option. Those who did not could avoid it.

The second modification affected all Level 3 students: the introduction of a project Colloquium day. The final year project comprises four modules, one of which is in Semester 1. The Colloquium was to take place at the end of the first Semester and students were to present their project proposal. The task was to present a clear outline of the method and rationale for the planned research study and to invite commentary, feedback and ideas. It was considered reasonable to give each student a 20-minute slot, 15 for presenting and five for questions. In order for this to be viable, it was necessary to run four simultaneous symposia, with two members of staff in each. Although this was quite a heavy demand on resources it was at least intensive and the team was of the opinion that it was justified. Each student was required to attend one full symposium (one half-day). The only outcomes were Pass or Fail, and this depended on the satisfactory presentation of rationale and plan. Criticisms of the plan did not affect the pass/fail but were seen as formative oral feedback. Each candidate was also subsequently presented with formative written feedback on his or her presentation skills.

As well as reintroducing a presentation on to the degree, the Colloquium had a second aim. It was timed to ensure that students had to engage sufficiently with their area of choice to be able to present adequately and, therefore, this acted as an incentive in the time-management of their project.

Evaluating it

Evaluations of the Colloquium suggested that both aims were achieved. End of year evaluation forms included the question:

Please tell us what you think was best and worst about doing project presentations. As Table 3 shows, the 59 students who responded, provided twice as many positive responses as negative. This is despite being asked for both!

Presentations were also spontaneously mentioned in the evaluations of the project modules and are presented in Table 4.

Four of the seven completed evaluations for Culture, Identity and Development also mentioned presentations, three of which were in favour (Table 5).

Table 3. What was best and worst about project presentations?

Positive items	Freq.	Negative items	Freq.
Develop ideas/understand/focus/organise	23	Hate presentations (including standing up in front of others)	13
Help/suggestions/feedback from either staff or peers	14	No fun/nerves/scary	10
Motivation (including work mood/good start)	11	No point/waste of time/repetition of ethics form	3*
Small groups	9	Too close to exams	3
Useful/good/Interesting	6	Didn't know what was expected	2
Not intimidating (relaxed/informal)	5	Rushed	1
Gaining presentation skills and confidence	2	No project idea so presentation was difficult	1
Necessary	1	Not graded, just pass/fail	1
Added to grade	1	Lack of guidance from supervisor	1
Neutral about presentations	1	Shouldn't be assessed	1
Easy pass	1	Dragged out the starting process, so I got bored	1
Keep them	1		
Realisation of the enormous task ahead	1		
Totals	76		37
No comment		7	

*Includes the paradoxical response: 'seemed to be a waste of time but got me into work mood'.

Table 4. Project Module Evaluations

Before Colloquium
Did not realise had to do a proposal for the presentation.
The information on the proposal and the presentation, what was required, was excellent.
Helpful workshops on presentation.
After Colloquium
Glad only one possible final presentation to deal with.
Presentation assessment helped me get my project ideas and intentions clear.
The end of term presentation was the turning point in my study. Well worth doing.
Helped prepare me to start writing the dissertation.

The Level 2 module on Developmental Psychology had maintained since its introduction the use of presentations as a teaching technique but not as assessment. The evaluations for this module in the last academic year (Table 6) that spontaneously mentioned presentations show again twice as many favourable comments as unfavourable.

Final year students were also asked to rate the usefulness and enjoyment of the different teaching strategies employed on the course. Presentations as a teaching method were ranked fifth out of six for usefulness (above workshops), and sixth for enjoyment. As a means of assessment they were ranked fifth out of seven for usefulness (above Examinations requiring essays, and MCQ examinations) but seventh on enjoyment. It would seem that these data are consistent with those of Sander, Stevenson, King and Coates (2000). If students are asked to rate

presentations the response is relatively negative. However when students are asked to reflect on presentations the response is more positive. It may be that hypothetical presentations generate a more negative response than does the reality. Certainly this interpretation is supported by the four respondents from Developmental Psychology (Table 6) who described how they were nervous before the presentations but enjoyed theirs and others.

Modifying practice

From these data it is apparent that students generally appreciate the role of presentation in their learning. This, combined with the earlier comments of external examiners and anecdotal evidence from students and graduates, justify the team's determination to maintain them as an integral part of the degree. We have modified our practice to accommodate the four-fold increase in student numbers by the sixth year of recruitment.

Table 5. Culture, Identity and Development Evaluations (n = 7)

Module chosen because said it was 100 per cent presentation.
Presentation the best part of the module: Based on a topic/angle student can choose = generally better motivation and eventual understanding.
Take out student presentations – I hate them.
For the presentation it may be better to prepare a paper and then present that paper.

Table 6. Developmental Psychology Evaluations (n = 33)

<i>Positive</i>	<i>Freq.</i>
Presentations were extremely useful, very interesting, best part of module	15
Was very nervous before my presentation but really enjoyed mine and others'	4
Very effective way of learning/promote independent learning	4
Provided different perspectives and student views on a subject – good	3
Good opportunity to develop presentations skills which are very important for future jobs	2
Good change from usual lecture structure – refreshing	2
Provided detailed and interesting handouts prepared by fellow students	2
Unfair that no lectures given on topics for last few presentations	2
Presentations increased motive to attend (I'll go to yours if you go to mine)	1
Glad the presentations were dealt with sensitively by lecturer as so many students afraid of them	1
They were good preparation for next year's presentation	1
Total	37
<i>Negative</i>	
Several people in the group avoided the presentations as were too nervous or embarrassed and so they and the rest of the group missed out on the topic	8
Don't like presentations as my learning depends on unreliable students who are often absent or present the information poorly	5
Turn the presentations into lectures so information presented better	1
Structured group discussions may be better than presentations because students don't turn up for presentations	1
Monitor students' topic choice for presentations more closely as they are often not relevant enough	1
The tutors weren't listening to the presentations	1
Good in theory but not worth the stress caused to many students by them	1
Total	18
<i>Advisory</i>	
Make the presentations more important in module mark	2
Perhaps have groups smaller than 10 for presentations to reduce intimidation factor	1
The group size was small enough to reduce intimidation factor in presentations	1
Would have been fairer to have the submission date for the critical summary before any presentations began	1
Emphasise more the importance of presentations so students more committed to them	1
Total	6

We are not, however, complacent, for two reasons. Firstly, we would like to extend the use of presentations in the degree and particularly to reinstate their use in Level 1. Secondly, our Level 1 intake is now 120 students, pushing our resourcefulness as a committed and professional teaching team to its limits. It is hoped that we will be able to retain the use of a technique that has proven to be both innovative and effective.

Discussion

If we just listen to the students when they rate presentations in a hypothetical situation, we would not expose them to presentations, whether assessed or not. When reflecting on a presentation, there is a very noticeable swing to a more favourable view. This has been shown in evaluations that specifically asked students to reflect on a particular presentation, as was the case for the Project Colloquium. Importantly, it has also been shown in module evaluations (Developmental Psychology and Culture Identity and Development) where students were asked only to reflect on the good points of the course and those points that would benefit from improvement. From a research point of view, it should be noted that if you want to find out the students' views on presentations, then you should specifically ask them about presentations in the module evaluation!

What happens when students have to engage with student presentations and when assessments are through presentations? What are the benefits to the students and how do the students feel when reflecting on their experiences? There can be no denying that presentations cause anxiety. Indeed, teaching can cause anxiety in even the most practised of teachers. Twenty-three responses (the two most frequent negative items) from the project presentation evaluations specifically remarked on the stressfulness generally of presentations. From the Developmental evaluations, a further nine

students commented on stress. Should teachers not expose their students to this stress? We believe that student presentations are both acceptable and desirable but teachers should recognise the stress they may cause in some students and offer all reasonable support. In Developmental Psychology and Culture, Identity and Development, this support has always been paramount. It is surprising that one student from Culture Identity and Development says that the presentations should be removed from the module because they hate them, when it was always made clear that presentations would be a core component of the module. However, as most of us involved with education will know this is not an isolated case of providing information for students to no avail.

Students tell us that they are concerned about the quality of material that they may receive through student presentations. From the data presented here, five students from Developmental Psychology specifically raise this concern, despite the fact that in this module this problem is minimised through requiring the students to submit, for grading, a critical summary from the area they were allocated for their presentation. A similar system is in place in Culture, Identity and Development, where an academic paper, seen to be similar to a paper in a conference setting, is submitted for grading prior to the presentation. There is one student, though, from the evaluations in Table 5 who seems to have missed this central point! Comparison of these module marks with other modules within the same year certainly shows that students are not disadvantaged by learning through presentations from other students. However, to claim that any increment in the module mark for either Developmental psychology or Culture, Identity and Development, over other modules or the year average was due to the use of student presentations would be most unwise.

In the research colloquium, it was not intended that the students necessarily learnt

from each other's presentations, so the frequent quality of the material was not similarly controlled. It is reassuring to note though, that the second most favourable comment the students made was about the feedback that they gained from the audience (Table 3).

In the Developmental Psychology evaluations (Table 6), five comments were made about the unreliable information, noting that some students fail to turn up for their presentation. The difficulties of assessing parallel presentations have already been noted, but formative peer assessment was included in this module for the first time in the academic year 2000/01 in a specific attempt to address this problem, in addition to the support already given. It is debatable whether it made any difference to the non-attendance rate, but the presenters were keen to read evaluations from their peers. It also gave the module leader further feedback on the quality of the talks. Summative and formative peer assessment is integral to Culture, Identity and Development, but there was no problem with non attendance, maybe because the presentations were teacher assessed, but also because the specialised nature of the third level option attracted just a small number ($n = 13$) of committed students.

Wherever presentations are assessed and count towards the overall degree qualification of the student, great attempts have been made to ensure that the marking criteria are specific, valid and reliable. The project presentations are not videoed, nor those in Culture Identity and Development, but, following feedback from the external examiner, they will have to be in future. We have no solutions to the impossibility of blind marking. The answer to students who tell us that they want to be taught by teachers, is that lectures still predominate on the degree, although this is usually prefaced by a frequently given comment on creating independent learners. Indeed Developmental Psychology and Culture, Identity and Development start with a

series of lead lectures, which are augmented and developed through the student presentations.

From the data presented here, we believe that there are sound professional reasons for believing that presentations are effective, in line with Rees and Harris (1992) and Curtis (1999). We are impressed by the level of energy that presentations generate in the students. There is no going to sleep! The quality of work that has come from Developmental Psychology and Culture Identity and Development has been commented on by external examiners, supporting the teachers' views. Indeed, for this, the first year of Culture Identity and Development, the mean module mark ranked the module second out of the ten taught modules in Level 3. The external examiner also noted that the assessment regime was innovative and clearly highly motivating for the students who had a high level of engagement with distinctive and varied material.

We believe that student presentations do encourage engagement with the material to a much greater extent than the ubiquitous lecture. It is true that not all students like presentations, but even a cursory examination of the data presented by Sander *et al.* (2000) shows that no teacher is going to please all students, all the time which hints at an overall solution. Student presentations have a place in the students' course. It would be as wrong to have a course dominated by presentations as it would to have a course dominated by lectures. Variety in the students' learning environment is essential and augmenting the lecture with presentations is beneficial. That is not to say that there are not other ways in which students can be encouraged to engage with the material which can be equally as effective. The following, unsolicited acknowledgement, suggests that student presentations can have a useful role to play, not only in the learning process but also in career opportunities. In this case, the student has recog-

nised a desire to become a teacher.

'I would like to thank (tutor) for (the) support in the last year and for providing a multitude of opportunities for giving presentations which has helped me recognise my desire to lecture...' (Project Student, 2001)

To promote effective learning, students need to be involved. Asking them to take the role of teacher and produce engaging presentations of their own seems to be an efficient way of doing this. It also has the additional benefit of providing students with a range of communicational and presentation skills that will be very advantageous in their future careers. Perhaps formal lectures with a low degree of student participation, involvement and control are an easy option for both the teacher the student?

There is evidence that says that students negatively rate the idea of student presentations (Sander *et al.*, 2000), creating a tension with the belief held by this teaching team that student presentations have a valuable place in the students' learning experience. We feel that our consideration of student evaluations of modules that have used student presentations, show that students themselves frequently feel positively about presentations when reflecting on their recent experience with them. It could be argued that control groups were not used in this study and in other ways, the study falls short of good experimental practice. For instance students' performance on the compulsory, Level 2 Developmental Psychology module could have been compared with their performance on another Level 2 module. Similarly, performance on Culture, Identity and Development could have been compared, either with another module, or the same students' performance on other options that they took. To have done this would have raised many more questions as a result of confounding variables such as different teachers, different material, different rooms, timetable slots, peers and so on. For the same reason, it would be unwise to compare

module grade performances, despite the face appeal of hard numerical data. Action research often results in studies that do not have the same methodological rigour expected in good experimentation. However, following a good experimental route in a teaching situation such as this would create numerous ethical and practical problems. What we have done is follow the line of action research promoting reflection on professional practice, with the intention of improving the quality of learning in our students (see Bryant, 1996). Whilst recognising the inherent limitations of this study, we are confident in the conclusions offered.

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